

My drink was on top of the jukebox where I'd left it. I picked it up and sat down at a table. My dress was digging into my stomach so bad I could hardly breathe. I was shifting around in my chair, trying to get comfortable, when the worst thing that could possibly happen to a rookie cop working undercover happened. Someone recognized me.

"Rosemary Gonzales!" he shouted for the whole bar to hear.

Every head turned. Great, I thought. Everybody's having a good look at me, everybody in the bar knows my name.

A guy about my age, dressed in black leather jeans and a tee-shirt, was walking straight towards me. "Rosemary Gonzales," he was saying, "Rosemary Gonzales. I can't believe it."

"I think you've got me confused with someone else." I looked at the ladies' room door in desperation. When were those two coming out?

He was standing over me, breathing on me. "Come on, you can't fool me! I'm your biggest fan. I've got every virtual Dilation ever made - I've zoomed in on your face, close up, a thousand times. I know every inch of you, intimately."

"I'm sorry," I said, "but you've got me mixed up with someone else. My name is Sandra, and I've never been in a virtual; I don't even like them."

"Don't tell me that. It's me. Victor. You remember me, don't you?"

"Victor?" I took a good look at the guy, and then I remembered. Orange-haired, pimply nutcase who used to send me flowers every day. And he used to write me letters, telling me how the two of us met and made love in his dreams every night, which he considered proof that we were lovers on the astral plane. I recognized him from the photos he used to send me, at least a dozen of them, all of him sitting alone in a room papered with pictures of me: close-up stills from every virtual I ever made. Even his ceiling was covered with them. I remembered he had a job somewhere, making dentures or something. A nutty, obsessive fan, but harmless. Dilation had loads of fans just like him, always writing weird letters and sending gifts. I figured it was better to admit who I was than to keep arguing with the guy - he probably just wanted my autograph; then he'd go away.

"Victor," I said, "of course I remember you. You used to call yourself Dilation's number-one fan, didn't you?"

"Not Dilation, only you. I saw their latest virtual and it was crap - you weren't even in it. What happened? Did you quit or what?"

I shrugged. "Something like that."

"So what are you doing now, Rosie?"

"Not a lot. Look, Victor, I'd appreciate it if you didn't tell anybody you saw me here, okay?"

"Don't want people to know how you've come down in the world, huh?"

I stared into my drink, willing him to go away, willing Castilla and O'Hara to come out of the john, willing Bruce to get out of his goddamn car and come into the bar and tell us we were leaving this dump and moving on to the next one. It didn't work. Victor leaned even closer.

"You knew how I felt."

I shrugged and glanced at my watch. Barely two

minutes had gone by since I'd left Castilla and O'Hara in the john. It seemed like a lifetime. "I don't know what anybody feels about anything," I said.

"You knew, but you didn't care, did you, Rosie? Didn't you get the flowers? I sent you flowers every day, remember?"

"That was years ago, Victor." I looked at my watch again. Another ten seconds went by; I know because I counted them, one by one. That rubber dress was killing me. I was sweating like crazy, and my skin itched all over.

"So how about it, Rosie?"

"How about what?"

"There's only one reason for coming to a place like this. You must want it bad."

I couldn't believe it; he actually expected me to go in the booth with him. He actually expected it. "No way, asshole," I said, "Fuck off."

Victor's eyes went narrow and hard. I felt a knife in my ribs. "That's not nice, Rosie. That's not nice, at all. Now stand up, real slow."

"Bruce," I said.

"What?"

"Bruce, come in right now!"

"Stop playing games, Rosie, before I get mad. Now get up real slow, like I told you, or I'll cut you right here."

Oh shit, I thought, Bruce couldn't hear me - my goddamn earring was in my bag, which I'd left in the ladies' room with Castilla. And so was my gun. I stood up slowly, like he said. He pressed himself hard against my side left side, pinning down my left arm, and put one arm around my waist, pinning down my other arm. Positioning himself so that the knife was hidden from view, he pulled me to my feet and away from the table. I could feel the tip of the knife through my dress. If he was planning to take me outside, Bruce would see. But he didn't take me outside, he led me towards the imitation velvet curtain at the back.

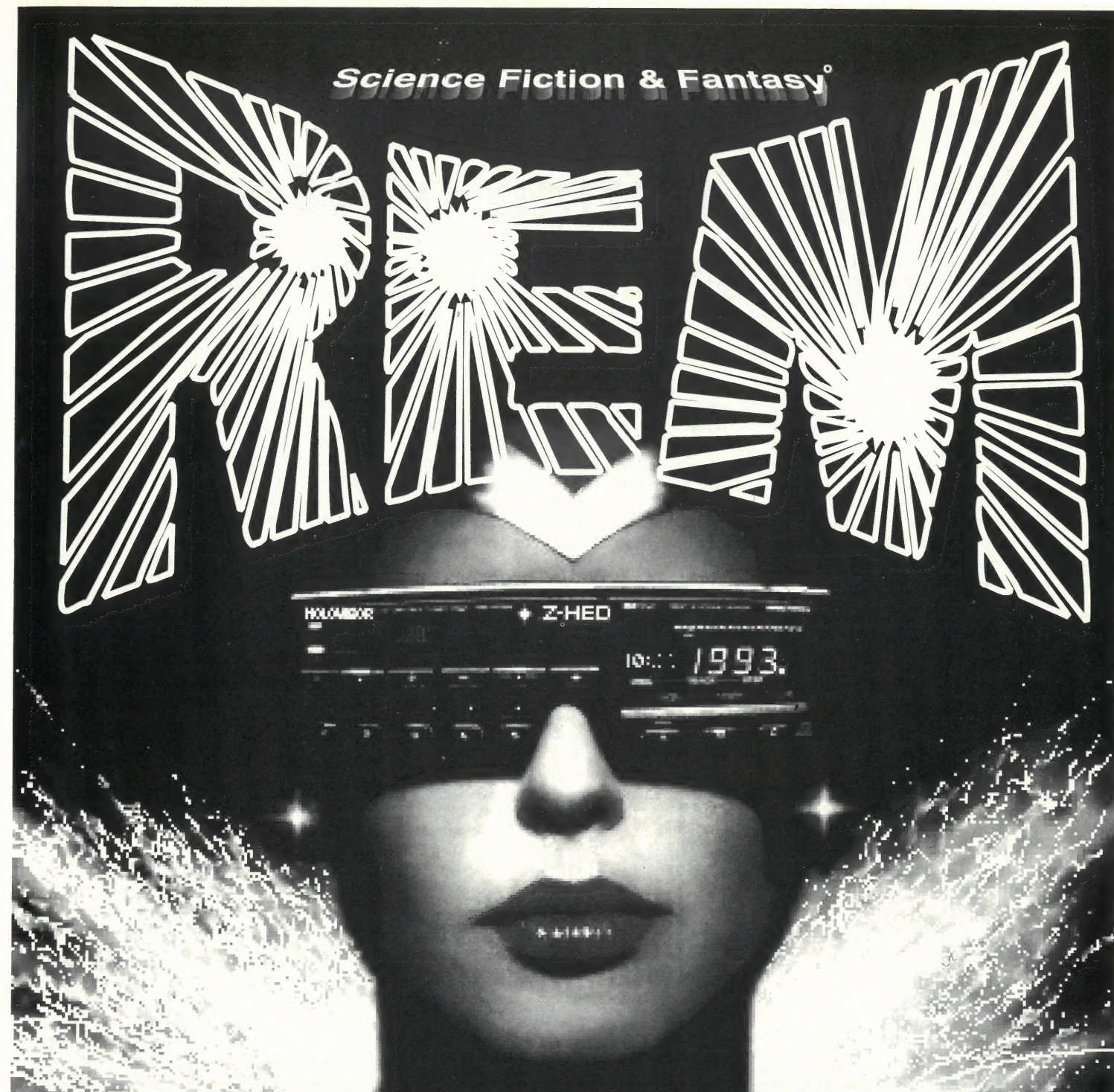
Once we were behind the curtain, he manoeuvred himself around behind me and raised the blade to my throat. "Don't make a sound," he said, "don't even whisper." He fed a one hundred dollar bill into a slot beside the booth door. It slid open, and he pushed me inside. He came in behind me, squeezing us both into the same compartment. "You can scream now," he said as the door slid closed behind us. "The walls are soundproof."

Victor pushed me back against the wall, his blade digging into my throat, my right shoulder bending the latex wall at my side. Behind him, I saw the exit button glowing faintly, just out of reach.

"Hey, Victor," I said, quietly, "what's this all about, huh?" The wall behind my back was vibrating. Then the piped-in music started, a slow thumping beat with lots of synthesized groans and heavy breathing.

"I was so wrong about you, Rosie. I used to think you were something really special. Everything I ever did I did thinking of you. I dreamed of the day we would be together. You were beautiful, but you were arrogant. You thought you were too good for me, didn't you Miss Rockstar? But look at you now, in a booth joint in the middle of a fuckin' disease zone! No better than anyone else. Not even half as good."

"Who said I was a star? I was a back-up singer."



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